



## Building wide-open experience at school for deaf, blind

Superintendent Carol Hilty likes to say that the Colorado School for the Deaf and the Blind, although unique, is simply a school serving the children of Colorado. “Our students just happen to be deaf and blind,” she said.

In 2010 the school won a BEST Grant that funded a much-needed expansion and complete renovation to its 58-year-old Gottlieb Building, which now serves as the hub of student activity on the campus. RTA Architects was selected as the architect for the challenging project.

“Two of the most important goals for the renovated building were an open design that would facilitate better visibility and communication for the deaf community, and flexible spaces that could be used for multiple purposes at any given time,” noted Stuart Coppedge, AIA, RTA’s principal-in-charge for Gottlieb.

The planning process was centered on a strategy that RTA would provide the school design expertise and the design advisory group consisting of the superintendent, board member, facilities manager, and teachers from CSDB would provide strong guidance concerning the needs of this student population. Residential schools have a unique culture, educational approach, and philosophy.

“CSDB was very clear we wanted to work in close collaboration with the architect to develop the design concepts that support the needs of our students,” explained Hilty. “Utilizing interpreters, RTA Architects conducted design charrettes in our DAG meetings, which included administrators,



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staff who are deaf and a board of trustees member. I always thought we had the perfect scenario. This is what the BEST program should be about: the partnership among school, architect, engineer and contractor,” added

Hilty. This partnership was rounded out by HCDA Engineers (structural), Plant Engineering Consultants (mechanical, electrical and plumbing), Bean Engineering (civil) and general contractor GH Phipps.

■ **The New Building.** Upon entering the Gottlieb lobby, one is first struck by its bright airiness and upbeat atmosphere. Expansive windows let in a wealth of natural daylight. A sense of timelessness pervades the foyer, as two of the original exterior stone walls now serve as interior walls, with original windows showcasing photographs of students in the Gottlieb classrooms who studied here in days gone by. We wanted to provide a world-class facility while maintaining the rich history.

Hilty has plenty to say, with words and hands, as she converses with students and faculty who happen by. “One of my favorite features of the new building is this: I can stand here in the foyer and have a conversation in complete view of a student or



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teacher up on the second floor. It’s a far cry from the old 1950s style school made up of classrooms and long corridors.”

Indeed, it doesn’t take long to grasp the value of this open, naturally lit building when you see the students and faculty conversing in American Sign Language. According to Hilty, openness was what they most wanted at the outset of the design for the new building. Not incidentally, this openness not only enhances communication for the deaf; it provides “passive supervision,” enhancing security and encouraging appropriate behavior.

“From an architect’s planning and design perspective, our goals extended beyond those set forth by the school’s planning committee,” explained Coppedge. “We wanted to craft beautiful, functional spaces that create a feeling of well-being and school pride from the moment one steps into the building foyer. It was our goal to preserve the historical aura of this beautiful 62-year-old

structure while gracefully introducing modern technology and style.”

Technology exists in virtually every area of the building. The building contains a media center and multipurpose room in which community sign language instruction is offered. Distance learning environments allow the classroom to fully connect to students who are deaf in remote areas of Colorado. The ability of these remote students and families to fluidly connect with the students and staff on campus enriches their lives in a way that was not previously possible.

“The renovated Gottlieb Building has been a great source of pride for students, staff and the CSDB community,” Hilty said. The Gottlieb Building earned awards from the American Institute of Architects, the Council of Educational Facilities International and the Historic Preservation Alliance of Colorado Springs.▲